FYI

The Honorable Gaylord Nelson, Congress of the United States, House of Representatives, Washington D.C. 20515. 21st January, 1970

Dear Senator Melson,

I hope I will be seeing you Saturday morning in Washington, but just in case our paths don't cross I thought I'd better write to you about two matters.

First, concerning our 'phone conversation the other day, my article for The Progressive is well under way and will get in well before the deadline.

Second, (and more important) I have been somewhat disturbed by recent publicity on the pill, and wanted to pass on some thoughts to you (for whatever they are worth).

As you know no drug can be considered 100% safe, and the pill is no exception. The fundamental question is: do the benefits of the pill outweigh the risks. I think this question must be answered largely on an individual basis, and the answer for any individual will depend on both personal and societal factors. Some examples:

- (1) Some women will not tolerate the pill well and should not use it.
- (2) Many sophisticated couples will prefer to have the male vasectomized after the desired family is completed rather than expose the woman to any risk, no matter how miniscule, from further use of the pill.
- (3) Risks of death from pregnancy and childbirth vary with maternal nutrition and quality of health care. In some developed countries these may be small enough to tip the risk-benefit rates against the pill for some patients. In many underdeveloped countries maternal risks may be high enough to favor the pill for virtually all patients.
- (4) In calculating risks the mental health of a woman having an unwanted child, and the psychological risks to that child, must be considered. So must the very grave societal risks of overpopulation.

Finally, let me point out that a much safer pill could probably be developed if a somewhat higher risk of failure (accidental pregnancy) could be accepted. If the Federal Government would pass a law banning anti-abortion statutes and instituting a program of subsidized abortion I am confident such a pill would be very acceptable. Women would know that they had a "back-up" in case the pill failed.

In conclusion I think it would be tragic if the government banned the pill. In particular this would lead other countries, where the benefits would generally be higher, to follow suit. It is important that all physicians and all American women in their reproductive years be as fully informed as possible so that they may make the appropriate risk-benefit calculations in each case — and the government should continue its research programs in this area. The pill should not be banned.

Best regards.

Paul R. Ehrlich, Professor of Biology

PRE:pas

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